

Upstairs Downstairs

There are outstanding ingredients and sandwich recipes at the new Roast to Go venture, the sandwich satellite of the famous Roast restaurant in Borough Market, London. But in all other respects there's a whole lot of polishing that needs to be done before the concept can be rolled-out, says **Nellie Nichols**



ROAST TO GO'S
MEAT SUPPLIER
SILLFIELD FARM,
NEXT DOOR
NEIGHBOURS IN
THE MARKET



I feel like I've arrived at a big glamorous exciting party, but embarrassingly far too early.

Everything looks disjointed. Most of the lights are off, yet there are well lit pockets of frantic activity and everything seems a little surreal. I'm standing by an early morning press party for a sheep – well, the launch of a unique mutton from the Pyrenees – and I'm grappling with the marketing line: "A sheep which does not find nowhere elsewhere".

This is early Thursday morning in Borough Market, setting up for its busy two days of opening but today, with one or two exceptions, it's shut. For those readers who have been to Borough on the days it does open, Friday and Saturday, you will be more than familiar with the fervent atmosphere of one of the most sophisticated food markets in Europe. Covering 4.5 acres, it was originally opened in 1754 at its current site at London Bridge. If you haven't been, you've simply got to go. It's a revelation, but make sure it's not on any other days of the week when your only entertainment may be dodging stray cabbages and perhaps, if you are very lucky, an opportunity such as tasting the bright red, firm to the touch, succulent meat of the very special Pyrenean Lamb.

Definitely open everyday though is Roast. Situated in the middle of the market, this rather grand, famous 120 seater restaurant started by Iqbal Wahhab, the founder of the infamous Cinammon Club, is dedicated to British cooking. With a strong partnership with The Prince's Trust, the profits from one of its tables go to the Trust to support its activities in the Borough of Southwark. The restaurant also supports very admirably, local educational initiatives with the market stallholders that enable local young people to acquire a greater understanding of how food is produced.

The latest brainchild of this very successful operation is Roast to Go, serving mainly hot sandwiches to take away. Situated literally right under the main restaurant, it has without doubt a satellite 'just-plug-in-the electricity' look about it. The joint entrance to both is a white tiled floor apron although Roast to Go with its grill counter,

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and very visual sink and prep areas, gives a more downmarket appearance than the restaurant's grander staircase and lift entrances. It has the look of something that may disappear as quickly as it arrived, or suddenly transform into an ice cream stall. It lacks the sleek modernity of its big sister and seems a little out of place.

I need to see if the product delivers anything like the reputation of the one upstairs. First I meet Beatrix and Guy behind the grill. Beatrix, from Düsseldorf is as passionate as they come, and before you know it is grilling and frying every ingredient she can lay her hands on to showcase the choice she is so very proud of. A staunch vegetarian, does she feel at all uncomfortable working in what is, without doubt, an environment knee deep in carcasses?

She tells me simply and very convincingly that her love is to feed people. It's not long before I believe her. First off she gives me the Field Mushroom and Fried Egg Butty. The huge organic black mushrooms are cooked in ridiculously generously thick slices to a special recipe with butter, Worcestershire Sauce and salt and pepper. Utterly delicious, especially with an absolutely genuine farm fresh egg and at £2.50 I think this is very reasonable.

The Bacon Butty (£2.95) is made with the special recipe bacon cured by Roast's next door neighbours in the market, Sillfield Farm in Cumbria and you can have it with one of those farm eggs for another 55p. The maple cure is distinct and one of the best I've tasted.

I'm intrigued to know if all these ingredients are used upstairs. I'm interested in the synergy between

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the two outlets and try with no avail to take up five minutes of Paul's time, the chef in charge, while Lawrence, the Head Chef is on holiday. (Me: "I'm writing a piece about Roast to Go, could I possibly have five minutes of your time?" Him: "Who are you? No I'm far too busy"). Before I know it, a tall dolly pretty girl is wafting a business card in front of me, reiterating how Paul is far too busy to see me (I did believe him by the way). She is the marketing assistant and is just as disinterested.

I now attempt to get a menu from upstairs. I am given a chillingly delivered message from Paul. If I want a menu I will have to get it myself. Finally, the lift door opens and another tall, carbon copy of the previous walks out and, as she passes, frisbees a menu to me. What pray, are these people on?

Back to the food, please. Downstairs Beatrix is cooking up a storm with a wide smile. I'm trying the Roast Banger Sandwich now at £2.95 – all these breakfast options are huge and very good value for money considering the provenance of the

ingredients. However, the packaging is lacking in any form of thought for the consumer and how he's going to eat it on the move if he wants to. That's more than likely as there is not a seat in sight.

Trying to hold Beatrix back is not an option and she's now feeding me the totally awesome Hot Salt Beef with English Mustard and Pickles. This is on soft-as-it-comes rye bread and is offered in two sizes, £3.95 and £5.50. There's a Pastrami, Farmer Sharp's Cumbrian version - (£4.50 and £5.95) with the same accompaniments but I managed to leapfrog over this option to get to the one I was most looking forward to: The homemade Cornish Plaice Fish Finger sandwich with Caper Sauce on soft white bread. This has to become one of my desert island sandwiches for evermore. Faultless. Beat a path to their counter to try one, you will never forget it I promise.

Lawrence Keough, the man in charge, says he wants to be "top of the premiership," fighting talk for a new kid on the sandwich block. There is no doubt that he has unmatched, outstanding ingredients and recipes but this whole set up is far, far away from being roll-out material. His 'upstairs downstairs' staff's attitude is not helpful or supportive. His packaging lacks thought and the branding is non-existent. (He is selling Illy coffee at 95p though – which will always be a crowd pleaser).

There's a whole lot of polishing that needs to be done to turn this into a viable proposition that could cut away from the apron strings of a famous restaurant in one of the best food locations I know. I do hope he works through the issues and manages it because there simply isn't enough of this sort of food around.



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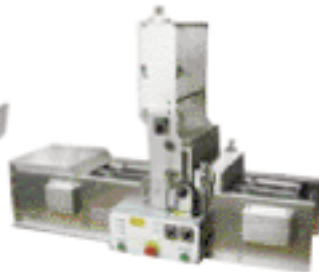
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